

BEDIÜZZAMAN SAID NURSI (1876-1960) AND ISLAMIC ECO-THEOLOGICAL ETHICS

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ABSTRACT

The present paper attempts to show how Bediüzzaman Said Nursi sees the environment in light of the Qur'anic understanding of the metaphysical world; why his thinking about nature is significant for Islamic environmental ethics; and how his suggestions for balancing human life in relation to other creatures of God can result in ecological equilibrium. The paper argues a rereading of Nursi from an ecological perspective is essential for addressing the present unprecedented environmental crisis. By reviewing his arguments and suggestions critically, the article will evaluate Nursi as an Islamic eco-theological ethicist. Furthermore, by correlating Nursi's understanding with various environmental issues and extrapolating his prescriptions for minimizing the ecological crisis, the paper contributes to the present discussions on Islam and environmental ethics.

Introduction

Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (1876-1960) was one of the most influential thinkers, philosophers and scholars of the twentieth century. His work can be seen as reconciling faith and science, religion and reason, tradition and modernity, the sacred and the profane, theory and praxis, and spirituality and secularity. Nursi developed a holistic approach to human knowledge by melding a deep understanding of the past with insight into his contemporary context, and extrapolating from that into a possible future. Though his understanding of the natural world is mostly based on the Qur'anic guidance, Nursi is credited with a participatory and sympathetic approach to nature and a new understanding. He interprets the traditional meanings of some Qur'anic verses with regard to the natural world, and emphasizes the role of humans as custodians of non-human animals. In his view, human life is full of duties and responsibilities; thus, humans are not only intelligent animals, but also very responsible ones. Nursi suggests humans extend their caring hands and loving minds, as vicegerents of God on earth, to the biotic and abiotic organisms of the environment. In his view, the natural world is a source for organisms, and represents the special blessings of God on all living forms, including human beings. By referring to some Qur'anic verses, Nursi requests human beings maintain the richness of nature and do not do anything that violates the balanced order of the environment. Furthermore, he advises people to lead their lives gently and treat their fellow creatures of God humbly. Such an understanding of human responsibility to the natural world implies an Islamic eco-theological ethics.

Background



Before identifying some contemporary works on Nursi's eco-theological thinking, it is helpful to become familiar with the work of Nursi himself. Nursi's primary work is *Risale-i Nur* (*The Epistle of Light*), which is also called *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati*, and is a collection of his thematic interpretations of the Qur'an on different issues. Unlike classical exegeses of the Qur'an, it does not follow a sequential system, but rather emphasizes specific meanings of the verses for further clarification. In the text, Nursi seeks to answer questions about materialistic and mechanistic world-views by referring to comprehensive understandings of some related Quranic verses augmented with philosophical arguments, logical analysis and scientific knowledge. In some ways, Nursi's *Risale-i Nur* offers a different kind of Qur'anic commentary. The main difference between *Risale-i Nur* and other Qur'anic commentaries lies in the arrangement of the contents and interpretations. Rather than basing his *Risale-i Nur* on the Quran chapter-wise, he emphasizes important themes. At the same time, Nursi relates the divine names of God to the manifest substances of the natural world, by arguing that every manifestation signifies the heavenly attributes of God.

Nursi wrestles with a European model of knowledge that emphasizes empirical epistemology and has little place for metaphysics or spirituality. He thus deconstructs the empiricist foundation of modern knowledge to construct a holistic epistemology that retains a metaphysical understanding of religion. He considers spiritual knowledge a crucial guiding force in keeping humans on the right track. As demonstrated in his writings, Nursi proposes a deep connectivity between the physical and the metaphysical worlds, and then attempts to prove that the fragmentation of this relationship is a cause of corruption (*fasād*) on earth. In this way, Nursi's cosmological thinking and metaphysical understanding serve as a foundation for Islamic eco-theological ethics.

The present study is mainly based on some secondary works on Nursi's view of nature and the human relation to nature. Scholars like Canatan (2000), Özdemir (2003a), Leaman (2003), Parvaiz (2004), Yucel and Sivri (2009), and Yucel (2018), among others, connect certain understandings and suggestions of Said Nursi with Islamic environmental ethics. Though they focus on Nursi's thought on the universe, nature, the environment and ecology, they do not relate his Islamic metaphysical and cosmological knowledge to a specific environmental approach, and fail to offer a critical analysis of Nursi's philosophy of nature. The current article attempts to fill this academic vacuum by outlining Nursi's environmental approach and offering a critical analysis of his thought.

Nursi's Holistic Approach

Nursi is "the most influential Islamic scholar in modern Turkish history" (Turner and Horkuc 2009, back cover). He was born in 1876 in the village of Nurs in the Bitlis province of eastern Turkey, and died in 1960 in Urfa, the capital city of Şanlıurfa province of south-eastern Turkey.¹ His family is of Kurdish origin. According to Nursi's claim, both of his parents, Mirza (father) and Nuriye (mother), were descended from the Prophet Muhammad, though that is not confirmed in an official record (Turner and Horkuc 2009, 5). Nursi received formal and informal primary and secondary education from local Islamic schools (*madāris*). He was an unusually meritorious student, and his memory was so sharp that he could easily memorize a book. His capacity to understand the crucial issues of his contemporary context was considered superior to that of his peers, leading one of his teachers to call him *Bediüzzaman*, a wonder of the age (Özdemir 2003b, 1214; Vahide 2005, 4; Markham and Birinci Pirim 2011, 9).

After completing his basic education, Nursi spent about three years in the residence of Tahir Pasha, the governor of the province of Van, and utilized Pasha's library reading books on different subjects, including history, philosophy, law, geography, mathematics, geology, physics, chemistry,

¹ There are some disagreements among Üstad Nursi's biographers regarding the actual year of his birth, though most sources refer to 1876 or 1877 (Sayilgan and Sayilgan 2011, 242, 251 n. 4). However, the former date seems more accurate than the latter (Turner and Horkuc 2009, 5). Now, it is accepted as 1878.

and astronomy (Vahide 1992; Sayilgan and Sayilgan 2011, 244). There he started to think of “the broader problems facing Ottoman society and the wider Muslim world” (Sayilgan and Sayilgan 2011, 244) and became convinced “that traditional Muslim theology alone was unable to answer the doubts concerning Islam that had been raised because of the growth of materialism” (Turner and Horkuc 2009, 11). At this stage, Nursi felt an urgent need to reinterpret Islamic theology by connecting it with the questions and problems faced by modern humans. Such a feeling inspired him to recommend the study of modern science in Islamic schools (*madāris*). Similarly, he also suggested introducing Islamic theological education into the modern educational system, so that students could be enlightened with divine knowledge. Thus, Nursi wanted a combination of the modern and the traditional religious educational systems.

In Nursi’s view, the real enemy of human beings is ignorance, and education can reduce this if conducted according to a holistic method. A proper educational system, as Nursi sees it, harmonizes spirituality and practical matters. In the absence of one or the other, no educational system can serve human society properly. In his view, the modern educational system talks about the physical needs of human beings and ignores their spiritual needs. On the other hand, traditional Islamic educational systems cannot integrate modern science with traditional knowledge. In his opinion, the two educational systems contradict one another rather than cooperate in qualifying humans for the visible and spiritual worlds concurrently. It was this that led Nursi to push for a holistic educational system to create a modern human being as an ideal citizen of the world.

Nursi witnessed two World Wars and the decline of the Ottoman Empire. He participated in World War I as an Ottoman soldier and involved himself with some administrative work and political issues. Until the emergence of republican Turkey, his life and works are considered part of his “Old Said” period (Özdemir 2003b, 1214; Vahide 2005). He contributed to the formation of modern Turkey, but when he realized the rulers and their policies were supporting ultra-modernity and secularism in the name of the so-called progressive reform and development, he turned away from the state powerholders and devoted his time to interpreting the Qur’an through a life of seclusion, meditation and worship (Özdemir 2003b, 1214). This period of his life is regarded as the “New Said.” Over this period of thirty years, including his exile and imprisonment, he composed his *magnum opus*, *Risale-i Nur*, “a six-thousand-page commentary on the Qur’an,” in order to address “the issues that came along with the process of secularization and modernity” (Sayilgan and Sayilgan 2011, 245-46). Özdemir terms the last ten years of Nursi’s life as the “Third Said,” arguing that during this period Nursi again felt the need for social and political reform (Özdemir 2003b, 1214; Vahide 2005, 3). Thus, Nursi faced different situations and difficult times, which he saw as an opportunity for reading and writing. He never compromised what he considered the truth, and not even substantial suffering prevented him from playing a significant role as an Islamic scholar and spiritual leader. He never desired worldly fame, wealth or power. That is why secular autocratic rulers were able to put him in jail and torture him, but could not break his mental strength. Even two months after his death, his body was removed from his grave by the then-military autocratic rulers and taken to an unknown place “in order to undercut his popularity among his followers” (Sayilgan and Sayilgan 2011, 246). However, Nursi left millions of followers and supporters to carry on his enlightened thinking.

As a practicing Muslim and spiritual leader, he sought to free his fellow Muslims from religious superstition, bigotry and hypocrisy. In this regard, I intend to make the point that Nursi uses some Islamic popular terms carefully. For example, in the matter of *jihad*, he never supports violence in any form without proper justification (Nursi 2009a, 483-484; Vahide 1992, 352; Sayilgan and Sayilgan 2011, 246-47). Overall, he considers self-purification the greater *jihad*, emphasizing this rather than the lesser *jihad*, which is viewed as a sort of violent action. Based on some prophetic traditions of Islam, Nursi relates *jihad* to pursuing knowledge and connects the term *shahid* (martyrdom) to a person who seeks true knowledge, using it for a proper purpose, and struggling for a just cause until death (Nursi 2009b, 396; Sayilgan and Sayilgan 2011, 247). He extends and applies these terms beyond the borders of the traditional Muslim understanding by

connecting intentions and actual deeds. Furthermore, he unhesitatingly includes the deaths of innocent people who believe in God, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, who died unjustly, were persecuted by oppressors, or were victims of unjust wars (Nursi 2009c, 141; Sayilgan and Sayilgan 2011, 249). For Nursi, knowledge is more powerful than physical strength (Nursi 2009d, 77). In his view, without proper knowledge, it is not possible to defeat modern atheism and ultra-secularism. Thus, Nursi considers “combating aggressive atheism and irreligion” a form of strong *jihad* (Vahide 1992, 352; Sayilgan and Sayilgan 2011, 247).

He emphasizes the real benefit of all humans, regardless of caste, creed, gender, ethnicity, nationality and language. He tries to unite human beings for their betterment and for a common interest. In his view, the three common enemies of human beings are ignorance, poverty and conflict. To remove these enemies, he suggests taking up the weapons of learning, hard work, and unity. He seeks to enhance amity between different nations and religious communities, and reduce the enmity among them. He participated in interfaith initiatives for peace and solidarity and suggests his followers also work with the people of other religious communities. Nursi’s understanding of human beings is noteworthy: human life is sacred in the sense that every individual manifests uniquely the beautiful names and attributes of God (*al-asma al-husna*) (Sayilgan and Sayilgan 2011, 250). Since every human works as a mirror of God on earth (Nursi 1996a, 340), they “cannot be the object of violence” (Sayilgan and Sayilgan 2011, 250). As for judging a bad action and its relevant punishment, Nursi talks only about individual punishment in response to actual actions. He never supports collective punishment. In this regard, his principle supports “absolute justice” not “relative justice” (Sayilgan and Sayilgan 2011, 250). Because of this egalitarian understanding of humanity, Özdemir (2003b, 1214) states that Nursi is a modern representative of two great Islamic sages, Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (1058- 1111 C.E.) and Jalāl ad-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī (1207-1273 C.E.).

Nursi deploys all his efforts toward fostering a God-centered world-view. Unlike a materialistic world-view, Nursi does not solely consider the interests of human beings, but instead remains very mindful of all surrounding biotic and abiotic forms in the natural world, and his attitude to these is wisdom, compassion, and kindness (Nursi 2005, 524; Özdemir 2003b, 1214). Nursi criticizes unnecessary killing of insects, for although some animals and insects may seem harmful and ugly, they perform their assigned duties in keeping the world stable. Even crows, worms, ants, eagles, etc. work like divine officials to clean the environment (Nursi 2009e, 341; Özdemir 2003b, 1214). He wrote a short book about flies, *The Treatise on Flies*. He extended his kind heart to all creatures and addressed them as “brothers.” Everything in the natural world serves as a true book,² and glorifies God in its own ways.³ Humans also learn different forms of knowledge and can find their way of living sustainably from every substance in the natural world. Moreover, Nursi includes each and everything surrounding us in “The Great Book of the Universe” (Özdemir 2003b, 1214). In this regard, Özdemir’s assessment seems relevant:

Thus, Nursi reads the universe as a book. He says that one page of this mighty book is the face of the earth and one word of the line is a tree which has opened its blossom and put forth its leaves in order to produce its fruits. (Özdemir 2003b, 1214)

Furthermore, Özdemir (2003b, 1214) notes that Nursi speaks of “the mighty Qur’an of the universe” (Nursi 1995; 1998a; 1998b) repeatedly in his works. Nursi does not see any contradiction

² According to Nursi, if the whole universe were to be understood and observed through a Qur’anic view, every substance of nature would turn into a real letter and book that could be studied, contemplated and researched by a human who has some basic Qur’anic knowledge (Özdemir 2003b, 1214).

³ Referring to the Qur’anic verse, “The seven heavens and the earth and all that is therein, glorifies Him and there is not a thing but glorifies His praise; but you (humans) understand not their glorification” (17: 44), Nursi (2005, 90) argues that everything in nature is sacred and has intrinsic value, and should not be devalued by humans in any way or degree.

between the teachings of the Quran and the lessons of nature (Özdemir 2003b, 1214). Both share the same divine message of the Creator, but in different ways: one deals with theoretical knowledge (in the case of the Qur'an) and the other reveals those theoretical discussions in practice (in the case of nature). Such an understanding of the natural world in connection with the Qur'anic message allows Nursi to view nature as a sacred book; thus, he suggests humans "treat the book of the universe respectfully and lovingly" (Özdemir 2003b, 1214). Nursi was not satisfied with the ongoing human activities in nature and suggested changing human attitudes and behaviors to favor the environment, and he also harshly criticized consumer-based modern society. He promoted instead an environmentally friendly lifestyle of seeing everything as significant, alive, and interrelated (Yucel and Sivri 2009).

As mentioned before, as a critic of a materialistic and mechanistic world-view, Nursi's Qur'anic approach to nature embraces a holistic vision. He argues that the spiritual aspect of nature is not recognized by secular philosophers and scientists; they deal merely with its external parts. For Nursi, everything has two sides, spiritual and material, and it is unwise to cover one dimension and ignore the other. The problem with modernity, as Nursi sees it, is that it focuses the outer part of a substance and keeps people ignorant about the inner side of the same substance. In his view, such partial approaches create environmental problems by violating the balanced order of nature and breaking down ecological equilibrium. In consideration of environmental sustainability, Nursi advocates adopting a simple life-style and being content with the least use of natural resources. In this regard, he focuses on "some Qur'anic principles such as justice, stewardship and kindness" (Yucel and Sivri 2009).

Nursi as Nature-loving and Animal Caring

Özdemir (2003a, 6) notes that, from childhood, Nursi loved and was a good observer of nature. He formed a deep relationship with his surrounding environment, and appreciated the beauty of the natural world manifested through such constituents as trees, animals, mountains, rivers, seas, sky, stars, moon, and sun, and so on. Nursi spent his whole life, up to his death, bearing a sympathetic attitude toward the natural world. In Özdemir's view, Nursi may have been influenced by the contemporary Sufi tradition (Özdemir 2003a, 6). In addition, Nursi's birthplace (eastern Anatolia), was dominated by Sufi practitioners, most of whom held a compassionate view toward God's creatures.

Yucel (2018, 56) mentions that "Said Nursi's approach to animals emphasizes the spiritual more than the material aspects of the natural world". His compassion was not restricted to any specific species, but rather was for all the animals that he encountered in his life (Vahide 2005; Yucel 2018, 56). In Nursi's view, "animals glorify and worship God by carrying out their duties in a wonderful fashion through obedience and conformity with His divine power" (Nursi 2005, 365; Yucel 2018, 56). He could not tolerate unjustifiable torture of animals by humans. Özdemir notes that Nursi even vehemently criticized one of his students for killing a lizard, arguing that he was not the creator of this animal, and so had no right to kill it except by the permission (i.e., justification) of its creator (Özdemir 2003a, 6). He disliked the shooting of birds, and did not even find any acceptable reason for killing flies with chemical sprays. Some days he shared his foods with insects such as ants (Özdemir 2003a, 6). When Nursi was asked about the status of non-human animals on earth, he referred to them as communities, much like those of humans (Nursi 1996a, 36; Yucel 2018, 56). This implies that Nursi recognized the right of animals to live and to be taken care of by humans (Leaman 2003). Though Nursi did not advocate vegetarianism, his sympathetic attitude to non-human animals seems stronger even than that of vegetarians, because it is deeply rooted in a Qur'anic metaphysical understanding.

Nursi's Understanding of the Environment

Nursi saw the environment in terms of its wholeness, and not its parts. His thinking on the environment stems from the Islamic cosmological and metaphysical teachings that he acquired from the Qur'anic view of the universe. Referring to some verses of the Qur'an (e.g., 13:16), Nursi (2005, 365; 2009e, 328; 2013, 156; 2005, 81-82) reminds people that the whole universe is created by God (e.g., Qur'an 2:284; 6:164; 22:64; 14:32) and everything in it glorifies God constantly (e.g., Qur'an 24:41; 13:72; 17:44; 22:18). Nothing in the universe is outside this process. All things, either willingly or unwillingly, are obedient to God (Qur'an 3:83). Influenced by Islamic mystic philosophy, Nursi develops one special theological point in that he relates all the realities of the universe to the different attributes of God (Yucel 2018, 61; Özdemir 2003a, 7), arguing that every name of God represents the specific manifestation of reality (Nursi 2013, 156; 2005, 81-82). The entire universe celebrates the divine names of God in their functioning (Nursi 1996a, 340). That is why all of God's names should be understood comprehensively and not separately, which can create misunderstanding (Özdemir 2003a, 14). Özdemir notes that Nursi (1998a, 655) agrees with some Sufis that "the Divine Names constitute the true reality of things, while the essence of things are only shadows of that reality" (cited in Özdemir 2003a, 7). Furthermore, Nursi (1998a, 654-55) considers the universe "the mighty book" of God, because it gives clear indications about the Creator behind the creation, just as the Qur'an offers the same guidance through its descriptions (cited in Canatan 2000, 618). Similarly, the planet earth functions as a book of guidance. Thus, the entire universe and its manifestation in different things is deeply rooted in Nursi's understanding of Islamic cosmology and metaphysics.

In Nursi's view (2009e, 232-50), the universe is not an independent entity as the secular scientists and philosophers claim; it has been instead created in due proportion (*qadar*) (Qur'an 54:49; 15:21), and has been controlled in a very balanced and just order (*mizan*) (Qur'an 55:7-9; 15:19); thus, it acts in accordance with God's command in order to perform its assigned duties. The way it works is simply called natural law, which the Qur'an calls *sunnatullah* (Qur'an 17:77), the law or order of God. Put another way, nature, as Nursi (2000, 242) sees it, is "a collection of the laws of Divine practice and an index of dominical art" (cited in Özdemir 2003a, 15). He criticizes secular scholars for not realizing the Artist behind the beauty of nature, and the Law-Giver behind the governing laws of nature. Nursi argues that by limiting their analytical understanding only to phenomena, secular scholars focus on the appearances of nature, but fail to recognize "the hidden hand" functioning in a very systematic way behind everything in nature, (Nursi 2009e, 232-50; Canatan 2000, 620). Nursi (2000, 244) uses the hidden hand metaphorically to represent God's power in nature. In his view, nature is an amazing artwork but not the artist (cited in Özdemir 2003a, 15), because it is the Creator who is the acute Artist of this beautiful universe. Nature works like a mirror (Nursi 1996a, 340; Canatan 2000, 621); In nature the power and wisdom of God are understood and perceived just as a mirror reflects a face. Nature is a sign (*ayah*) of God because it gives an indication about its Creator, much as a Qur'anic verse does (Yucel and Sivri 2009, 81-85; Parvaiz 2004). The Quranic term *ayah* is used both for nature and the verses of the Qur'an (Yucel and Sivri 2009, 81-85; Parvaiz 2004). Like all other Islamic scholars, Nursi states that the Qur'an is a book of theoretical knowledge for the purpose of guidance, while nature reveals that guidance practically (Yucel and Sivri 2009, 81-85; Parvaiz 2004). In the same vein, Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1989) views nature as the theatre in which God's signs are manifest (cited in Parvaiz 2004). Humans are a part of the natural processes, but not their master (Parvaiz 2004).

The planetary earth is a beautiful garden of God, where every part increases its beauty. Its flowers spread sweet scent and its fruits are delicious. The animals enjoy their lives. Plants and trees enhance the green scenery and provide necessary support to all. The bodies of water—rivers, lakes, seas, etc.—are filled to support lives on earth. The mountains serve as strong pillars that keep the earth stable. The blue sky gives contentment to our seeing. Human beings are a unique creation of God on earth. Their assigned role is to protect this garden by taking care of it. For Nursi (2009e, 235-44), every creature in creation has its own intrinsic value and should be respected by humans. At the same time, humans are allowed benefit from each thing of the garden, and they are permitted

to enjoy the garden. They are not, however, allowed to exploit it just because of an unlimited desire to lead their lives luxuriously and more artificially. The earth is a place shared by all of God's creatures; thus, humans must maintain a friendly relationship with all creatures when benefiting from the earthly environment.

The entire universe and all its elements expect to see humans take a responsible role in nature as responsible creatures of God. A misguided human is disliked by every part of the natural world and everything prays to God for shelter from harm from that human. By contrast, all constituents in the universe appreciate a guided human for his or her obedient work for God and responsible behavior toward them. They also pray to God for the forgiveness of a guided human. Nursi (1998a; 2005; 2009e; 2013) argues that all things in the universe, including humans, are charged with the elevated duty to perform their own functions and to glorify the Creator from their place in the universe. Because of this, they appreciate what happens correctly and dislike what occurs incorrectly. Since humans are unique creatures of God (*khalifa*), enjoying a kind of autonomous power and choice given by God, their responsibility (*amanah*) is greater than other creatures in performing their duties among themselves, their duties to God, and their duties to God's creation.

In short, Nursi's philosophy of the environment, as Özdemir (2003a, 16) notes, includes all elements of the environment. He sees the natural world as meaningful and worthy. Nothing is purposeless. All things, be they biotic or abiotic, are interdependent, interrelated and interconnected in a healthy competition and interaction through following God's law. They work for others just as they do for themselves. Thus, they glorify God through their continuous performances. As far as humanity's role is concerned, human attitudes and activities toward the environment should not be destructive to the ecological system.

Nursi's View of Environmental Cleanliness

Özdemir notes that Nursi emphasizes the importance of a neat and tidy environment (Özdemir 2003a, 16). In Nursi's view, the environment was originally clean and pure because of a universal principle of cleanliness. Nursi relates this principle to one of God's names, *al-Quddūs*, the most Holy One (Qur'an 59:23). According to Nursi (1996a, 340), all pure things reflect a manifestation of this name. He argues further that every part of creation takes part in the cleanliness reflected in God's name, the most Holy (Yucel 2018, 61). For example, the eyelid cleans the eye by itself (Özdemir 2003a, 17). Trees absorb carbon dioxide emitted by animals; animals take oxygen that is supplied by trees. The ozone layer makes the sunlight tolerable and suitable for earth's inhabitants through its filtering process. These are a few examples of how different elements of nature keep the environment fresh and stable. Furthermore, some abiotic constituents, such as fire, water, wind, soil, and sunlight, are frequently used for the purpose of cleanliness.

Islam takes environmental cleanliness seriously. Cleanliness is not only suggested but required for the performance of all religious rituals. Referring to many Qur'anic verses and prophetic statements, Nursi (2000, 396-97) shows how much Islam emphasizes a proper maintenance of cleanliness. It therefore becomes a part of faith, and is thus transformed into Islamic culture (Özdemir 2003a, 17). The Islamic concept of cleanliness incorporates external and internal cleanliness concurrently. Purity of heart cannot be achieved without purity of environment; both are interrelated and interconnected. A healthy environment is a pollution and alteration free environment; thus, humans should not do anything that leaves the environment dirty and unhygienic. For Nursi, cleanliness is not limited to individual and social hygiene, it is also a universal reality, because the universe has its own recycling system through which it keeps itself clean and pure (Nursi 2000, 397; Özdemir 2003a, 17). Humans should learn this system from the natural world to maintain a hygienic environment for themselves and their surroundings.

Ecological Crisis in Nursi's View and the Way Out

According to Nursi's metaphysical understanding (2005, 653-54), environmental degradation stems from a broken relationship with God and nature. It started with the development of European Renaissance humanism and was further triggered by the European Enlightenment, according to which humans (European white man⁴) are the highest beings and the center of all things, and all attention is given to them, even more than to God. A significant amount of literature was produced in appreciation of the beauty of human body: artists were busy portraying the human body in their creative activities; philosophers deployed their arguments to prove that humans were superior beings in the universe; and scientists used their experimental knowledge to disprove human spirituality. Metaphysics, which deals with non-visible things and beings, was neglected in philosophical discussion. Instead, the physical world became the sole focal point for discussion. The existence of the spiritual world was considered superstition. Through the process of secularization, the natural world was separated from its connection with God and other spiritual beings, such as angels. Human beings were now viewed as completely independent from any spiritual being and given the supreme authority to subdue the natural world for their limitless wants. With scientific knowledge and technological advancement, humans started to exploit the natural world as they wished. They began to cut down trees, level mountains, block rivers, extract natural resources indiscriminately, produce carbon dioxide in huge amounts, and throw solid and liquid waste into water and soil, etc. All these activities in nature only occur because of their so-called economic advantages, yet they leave the environment degraded, hazardous, polluted, destroyed, and a catastrophe. The way modern humans produce pollution in the environment goes beyond natural recycling and readjusting the system.⁵ Therefore, such unlimited artificial activities by humans all over the world are causing a collapse in the balanced environmental system, resulting in the present unprecedented ecological crisis.

According to Islamic eco-theologians (Nasr 1968; Canatan 2000, 615-21) the present environmental crisis results from a broken relationship between God and humans. When God is kept out of human thought and activity, humans spoil the checks and balances of power, because God is the source of balance, measure and order (Qur'an 15:19; 15:21; 54:49; 55:7-9). That is why humans cannot maintain just and balanced behavior with their cohabitants on earth. By showing their mastery in nature, humans neglect what should be done with the other creatures of God. The modern lifestyle is based on a materialistic world-view that has made humans greedy. They are not satisfied with the natural system; they interfere with nature through artificial activities aimed at satisfying their unlimited wants. While in a traditional worldview humans knew a sort of contentment with the natural production system, now they control or tame nature with the power of science and technology to achieve greater utility. However, they do not realize that they jeopardize their long-term benefit for the sake of achieving short-term privileges. Such human interference and exploitation in nature is what drives the present unprecedented crisis.

Canatan (2000, 622) sees Nursi as a critic of secularizing knowledge and a mechanistic worldview. The mechanistic view of the world was developed by Isaac Newton (1642-1717) (Santmire 1985, 135). In Newton's view, nature works like a machine, and humans can use this machine as much they wish for their benefit. In this worldview, nature is seen as a dead entity instead of a living organism. Such a mechanistic approach to nature goes as far back as ancient materialistic philosophy. Ancient Greek philosophy suggested a dualism between mind and body

⁴ According to İbrahim Özdemiş (personal communication, 3 August 2021), "Eurocentric perception of history and colonization of nature and the world go hand in hand". Similarly, in the view of Jeremy Lent (2017), the Western civilization's "cultural metaphor of conquest of nature", was "paralleled by an equally ambitious conquest of the rest of the world by European powers, leading to the decimation of indigenous populations and the rise of empires that spanned the globe."

⁵ After analyzing some reports about ecological destruction, Canatan is convinced that "plant and animal species are being consumed at a rate approximately ten times greater than the natural tempo" (Canatan 2000, 610). Similarly, the WWF 2012 Living Planet Report reveals the same information by stating that humanity's annual demand on nature is several times higher than a naturally supplying system (cited in Alpy, Özdemiş, and Demirbas 2013, 3). Some analytical reports based on the ecological footprints of several places show similar data.

that was kept at a synthesized level in the medieval period. In the modern period, this dualism was then justified by scientific knowledge (which states that empirical knowledge is the only criterion for knowing), creating a further demarcation between matter and spirit. French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650), who is considered the father of modern philosophy, brought this dualism into philosophical discourse, and argued for the difference between body and mind. British philosopher and scientist Francis Bacon (1561-1626) developed the scientific method and experimental philosophy. Both Descartes and Bacon argued that the natural world is a lifeless entity that can be used and controlled by the creative human mind and through human activities for the benefit of humans. Nature works like a machine; they talk about the motion in matter that runs matter, but do not acknowledge the hidden command of God (Canatan 2000, 620), which lets everything work accordingly. The positivism of August Comte (1798-1857) then advanced the view that objective reality, grasped through observation and experimentation, is the sole way of acquiring knowledge, and that revelation has no place as a source of knowledge.

In this scientific view, it seems that if God is to be recognized, God should be seen at best as a sort of clockmaker (Canatan 2000, 613). After making the clock, God does not interfere, and the clock runs by itself. In this way, God's hand of intervention in nature is cut off by scientific knowledge and philosophical argumentation. Scientists and philosophers thus developed a new concept, deism, according to which God's power is limited and controlled (Canatan 2000, 613). This new God, created by evidence from natural phenomena, and not by traditional religious faith or revealed messages, is confined to the creation process only, and as a result, God becomes a superfluous category in natural activities. According to the understanding of deism, everything runs by itself, and God never intervenes. This kind of belief supports the materialistic and mechanistic worldview. Even some forms of theology accepted deism in religious discourse to update religious faith (Canatan 2000, 613). Thus, science, philosophy, and theology hand over God's power to control nature to human hands, as if humans have become masters of nature to be served by all elements of the natural world. Modern humans find themselves at the highest peak of their dignity and claim their supremacy and excellency in nature, devaluing all other elements of the natural world. This view originated from humanism, was supported by secularism, and is now endorsed by scientific discovery and technological advances. Even the Christian church in Europe, alongside some religious scholars, endorsed these transformations and expressed their joy in them, seeing them as the fulfillment of the biblical mandate "to subdue" and "rule over" (Genesis 1:28). Furthermore, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) promoted the view that only humans have ethical rights and values; other non-human animals have no right to ethical consideration because their value is based on human needs. Previously, nature was a world of mysterious ideas enjoying human respect. Now it is transformed into a conquered field for establishing the monopoly of humans. When nature was hijacked from the hand of God, the ecological crisis began, as Nasr (1968) views it, though it took time to realize.

Remedy of the crisis lies in the restoration of a deeper relationship of humans with God and nature, which was broken by modern human beings through their secularization of nature. Nursi relates this crisis and its solution to his metaphysical understanding. He sees two dimensions to the universe; one its external side, which is visible (*zahir*), and other the internal (*batin*), but invisible portion. The problem is that modern humans are only focusing on the visible side of the natural world because their material knowledge cannot go beyond this. However, they should not deny the inner aspect of the natural world, for which they need special knowledge. Yet unfortunately modern humans miss this point by neglecting the traditional sources of knowledge. Material knowledge shows motion in matter, but not the hidden command behind the motion. Why there is motion at all is not answered satisfactorily by materialistic scientists and philosophers. They commonly talk about a natural law behind motion, but again the questions follow: why is there a natural law, who governs this and whose command does it follow? For Nursi (1995; 2000; 2009e), all these philosophical questions have a very simple answer—there is a command of God from which matter receives its motion. Everything, be it biotic or an abiotic organism, is bound to obey God's

command. In Nursi's view (1996b), just as every element of the natural world follows the command of God; so also, they work as a missive from God to us. In this way, each part of the universe is considered by Nursi (2007, 67) a letter of the Creator. It can be argued that when modern humans come to this realization, they will change their wrongful perception that nature works like a machine without the command of the most intelligent being behind it. If they make this change, they will reconnect themselves with both the creator and the created; they can follow the balanced measure and order that are common features in God's creation; and they can maintain a just relationship between themselves and God's other creatures. A prime solution to the ecological crisis, as Nursi (1996a) suggests, is a cosmic dance, in the sense that all biotic and abiotic substances remain undisturbed in playing their assigned roles. In Nursi's view (2005, 81-82; 2013, 159), this cosmic dance is the worship of God reflecting a way of life. However, modern humans are far removed from a worship-based life-style. Instead, they follow a consumer-centric life-style, which ultimately brings them to environmental catastrophe. Without a radical change of the present human attitude toward nature, there is no solution to the ecological crisis.

Nursi's argument suggests a paradigm change from a secular worldview to a religious one (Canatan 2000, 621-22), more specifically to the Qur'anic worldview (Özdemir 2003a, 7). The secular worldview sees nature from a materialistic point of view, while a religious worldview sees nature from a spiritual and metaphysical perspective. In the secular view, nature is seen in its visible dimension. Contrary to this, both the visible and invisible dimensions of nature are seen in a religious worldview of nature. The secular approach to nature is created by humans who think of their own benefit first, and then of other humans and animals; such a view cannot provide ecological equilibrium between humans and creation with. Conversely, as a religious worldview relates to the Creator of everything, it cannot deny the rights of others to be cohabitants with humans on earth, and humans are encouraged by this view to take a sympathetic attitude to non-human animals and to act gently in nature so that other things are not unjustifiably harmed by their actions.

Nursi's Approach to Islamic Eco-Theological Ethics

Before discussing Nursi's approach to the environment, it is helpful to become familiar with some existing religious/ theological approaches to ecological ethics. Michael S. Northcott argues eco-theological approaches are generally categorized into three: (1) human-centric or anthropocentric; (2) theocentric; and (3) eco-centric (Northcott 1996, 124-63). Human-centric views have human interest as the highest priority, with humans treated as superior and other animals as subordinate to humans. In the theocentric approach, the whole creation is a locus for communion between God and humans. This approach is supported by people such as mystics, who realize that the power of God exists in every part of nature and hence prioritize a God-centric view of the environment. An eco-centric approach gives priority to the environment.

An Islamic eco-theological approach provides a holistic view of the environment based on Islamic cosmological and metaphysical understandings, and it encompasses all three of Northcott's approaches. Islam does not strictly stay with any single approach, because all of these approaches have their merits and demerits. Man-cho Lau demonstrates the ethical dilemmas in the perception of rights in these approaches (Lau 2005, 14). It is generally argued that if we abandon anthropocentrism, due to its devaluing of other animals and plants, and accept eco-centrism in the truest sense of the term, we cannot accommodate the privileged human position in the creation.. Similarly, if we accept the radical theo-centric approach, as the mystics do, does it not reveal a kind of negligence about worldly life and human relationship with God's creatures? Because of such challenging questions, none of these approaches are free from shortcomings. That is why Lau suggests a reconstruction of the three dominant approaches (Lau 2005, 1, 18-19). He argues that each has a very specific centre in its approach to environmental ethics. He therefore proposes a "de-centering" approach that takes the form of a relational mode including all three dominant

approaches. It may be applicable in approaches to Islamic eco-theological ethics, but the Islamic understanding seems more inclusive than Lau's argument suggests.

Nursi was not familiar with the three philosophically developed approaches to eco-theological ethics, so it is difficult to determine which one best matches his eco-theological understanding. Sometimes it resembles the anthropocentric approach, because of his traditional view of human supremacy. As Canatan notes, Nursi supported "the highest position" for humans in the universe (Canatan 2000, 619). Such a statement by Nursi could lead to the assumption that only humans have intrinsic value and that non-human animals have none of their own, and are instead created by God to serve humans. This is not completely true of Nursi's approach, because he recognizes the intrinsic value of God's all creatures. In this regard, Özdemir notes that Nursi never argues that the creation is valuable only when it comes into human service, as in the anthropocentric approach, where everything in the universe is independent of humans (Özdemir 2003a, 8; Nursi 2005, 90). Thus, Özdemir believes that in Nursi's view, humans are not the only purpose of the universe, and in the universe, nothing is purposeless. Everything has its own value and also produces value for others. Nursi (2009e, 234-44) thinks that everything in the universe is created with due order and measure; nothing can violate its duties as assigned by God. In terms of creation and each thing's activities, all things in are interrelated, interconnected, and interdependent. Thus, Nursi (2009e, 234-44) sees every element of nature as a valuable and precious entity. If we grant these statements by Nursi to mean the maintenance of a deep and mutual relationship between humans and animals, and between living forms and non-living forms in terms of interaction and interdependence, which biological science calls ecology, then Nursi's understanding of the natural world also includes an eco-centric approach to environmental ethics.

Needless to say, the central theme of Nursi's cosmological discussion is the Creator, because he repeatedly references the universe as "the signs and missives of God" (Nursi 2009e, 234-44; Özdemir 2003a, 9). Nursi understands these missives through his mystical feelings and experience.⁶ For him, everything, be it biotic or abiotic, is created by God; all things glorify God, and will finally return to God. Compared with God, everything is of relative value and lacks permanent value. God is everlasting being with no decay and no renovation; thus God's value is incomparable and permanent. All created things obey God by following God's command, and their interest lies in following God's command. In principle, they serve God; and God is the centre of all their activities. Thus, the theo-centric approach to environmental ethic is also explicit in Nursi's metaphysical discourse.

Nursi's understanding of the environment comes from his Islamic metaphysical views, which cover anthropocentric, eco-centric, and theocentric approaches to environmental ethics. His environmental understanding is not tied to or confined in any specific approach, but rather covers all these three approaches collectively, because he emphasizes the relationship of humans with God and nature in a healthy environment and sustainable ecological system. He frequently argues on the Qur'anic bases (55:1-9; Nursi 2000, 392-96) that the universe is created with a balanced order, due proportion and just measure, which are its fundamental principles. This orderly system comes from God and acts in accordance with God's commands, and when humans have a good relationship with God they do justice to this natural system. That is why a proper understanding of God is crucial for creating a good relationship between God and nature. In his view, when humans reconnect themselves with God they also do justice to every element of the environment, because a God-consciousness grows inner feelings and sympathetic attitudes towards God's creatures. For Nursi, God-loving humans will not produce anything that will allow God's other creatures to become

⁶ In this regard, İbrahim Özdemir has rightly said, "the writings of Said Nursi are grounded in his multiple experiences of unveiling of the Divine. Nursi points to these experiences in different parts of his works through the use of a number of concepts and phrases such as *ilham* (inspiration), *sünihat* (accesses), *hads* (spiritual analogy), *tuluat* (offshoots), *tahattur* (remembering), *yazdırıldı* (I was made to write), and *kalbe geldi* (it came to the heart)." (Personal Communication with İbrahim Özdemir, 3 August 2021)

extinct through the destruction of their habitats. Such humans are humble and never behave on earth like tyrant rulers exploiting nature for their own benefit only. Instead they consider themselves guardians, care takers, preservers and protectors of God's creation.

Findings and Critical Analysis of Nursi's Understanding of Environmental Ethics

From the preceding discussion, it becomes clear that Nursi's environmental view is a byproduct of his Islamic cosmological and metaphysical understanding. His own lifestyle and caring mind reveal him as an environmentally friendly scholar. He sees the environment in its wholeness, which is why he articulates it with universal principles, and more significantly, with the Creator. He is upset to see the way modern humans deviate from this root, which he states is the prime cause of the ecological crisis. From this understanding, Nursi attempts to draw attention to reconnection with the origin. Yet he finds an obstacle in the Western knowledge system, which is based in visible and not absolute realities. He attempts to respond to such challenges from a philosophical point of view drawing on the traditional sources of knowledge. In this regard, he takes the Qur'an as the authentic source of knowledge. His groundbreaking work, *Rishale-i Nur* (the Epistles of Light), is based on a methodology of interpreting the world and human worldly activities in light of Qur'anic principle and guidance. Nursi has a spiritual method that allows him to approach the environmental crisis in a way that his contemporaries do not. His central theme is revitalizing the primordial relationship in the human mind, and this point is frequently reflected in his writings.

Nursi's solution to problems that arise, especially the ecological crisis, lies in the restoration of the relationship between God and humans, which was broken by modern worldviews. He argues that when humans revive their relationship with the Creator in the light of revelation and reason (Nursi would say unity of revelation and reason), they also restore a sympathetic relationship with all of God's creatures. A God-consciousness can show the proper way to maintain the balance and due order that should exist in everything in the natural world. All of God's creatures are interrelated, interdependent, and interconnected in their functioning in following God's unavoidable commands, and humans should not disturb this interconnectedness without justifiable and permitted cause. The eco-psychological dimension of this perception is self-evident. Only a God-conscience prevents humans from creating such disturbance in the creation of God.

It may be argued that Nursi places insufficient emphasis on practical initiatives to save the environment. His ecological understanding and narrative may be too idealized. People may criticize Nursi for concentrating more on the God-human than the human-nature relationship. They may argue that the God-human relationship over-emphasizes an anthropocentric approach to environmental ethics, and de-emphasizes the importance of other creatures, and that the human-nature relationship over-emphasizes the significance of non-human creatures for environmental sustainability. Though Nursi advocates planting trees, taking care of animals, controlling greed, and practicing frugality for the sake of just behavior with regard to nature, he does not mention controlling population size.⁷ However, for secular environmental activists and scholars, there is a connection between the ecological crisis and population size, as an increasing population means more pressure on the environment. That is why John B. Cobb (1972), a Christian eco-theologian, suggests keeping the population as small as possible.

Humans are now familiar with modern science and technology, but Nursi does not offer sufficient guidance on how to use these two innovations properly alongside the ecological system.

⁷ This allegation is refuted by İbrahim Özdemir: "Instead he articulates on the optimize use of resources, criticizes culture of consumerism and selfish and hedonistic overconsumption and underlines equal use and distribution of resources" (Personal Communication with İbrahim Özdemir, 3 August 2021). For a detailed description about Nursi's prescription on simplicity of life style and equal distribution of resources, see Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (1994), *On Ramadan, Thank, and Frugality* (Pieces from the Risale-i Nur Collection), Istanbul: Sozler Publications; Sabahaddin Zaim (1997), *The Treatise on Frugality in Third International Symposium on Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*, Istanbul: Sozler Nesriyat.

Green technology and renewable energy sources are frequently suggested as means of mitigating environmental problems. In this regard, Nursi makes neither specific comments nor concrete suggestions. He shows a kind of negligence to Western science, which seems not fully justifiable. If science is taken as a special knowledge of human civilization, then it also comes from God, and it does not matter who utilizes it. At the same time, scientific knowledge should arguably be tested by authentic divine knowledge, i.e., revelation, otherwise it may misguide humans about the absolute truth. People may be criticized if they misuse this special knowledge for their own interests, thereby destroying the environment. Islamic civilization has produced many scientists who generated new knowledge; they have also worked as transmitters of ancient knowledge to the modern world. Modern technology makes human life comfortable, even though it harms the natural environment in many ways. The question should thus focus on the ethical use of technology. Technology is a neutral thing; it performs what is directed by humans. If humans handle it properly, it can produce beneficial things for humanity. If a human who is not properly oriented is in charge of technology, it can produce misery and suffering for society. Science and technology do not know about ethics, they only know how to perform. It is the human who should thus be trained in moral/ethical teachings to handle science and technology, not only for human benefit, but also in the interests of the environment. Even though he does not criticize Western science and technology, Nursi does not praise and appreciate the Western approach to generating modern science and technology either. Thus, he seemingly lacks a kind of moderation or adjustment somewhere between acceptance and rejection.

Conclusion

Other Islamic scholars rarely relate the manifest objects in the universe to the Qur'anic verses and God's names in the way that Nursi does. His *risale-i Nur* is a commentary on the Qur'an, but is different from earlier exegeses, and in this regard, seems unique and distinct. For Nursi, the Qur'an is the authentic source of true knowledge and the core criterion for judging all things. In his view, all other sources of knowledge are supplementary, and cannot provide the real knowledge. Thus, Nursi develops his ecological understanding based on the Qur'anic interpretation of metaphysics. He shows how everything is interrelated in nature. His approach to the environment lies in the proper and balanced relationship of humans with God and nature. Nursi emphasizes maintaining this triangular relationship properly for environmental sustainability. His view of nature is not necessarily restricted to any specific approach to environmental ethics, but covers a holistic philosophically developed eco-theological approach. Though Nursi does not do any specific work on the ecological crisis, his provocative thinking creates an awareness in human consciousness of the need for a just and balanced human-nature relationship. There may be some criticisms from a pragmatic point of view, but these do not minimize his profound contribution to the field. The more work that is done on Nursi's view of environmental ethics, the more awareness of ecological sustainability will grow. Such increasing awareness will lead humans to act for a healthy environment and sustainable ecology. So, for a sustainable future, study of Nursi is relevant and crucial from various angles.

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